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Pattern of conferences

Career development in language services: the post of reviser

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

Summary

The staffing tables of the translation services, sections or units at all conference centres provide for a revision capacity that allows for the revision of translations effected by junior staff and the revision of translations of important or sensitive material. It is the policy of the Secretariat to maintain that capacity intact.

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1. The General Assembly, in paragraph 26 of its resolution 53/208 B of 18 December 1998, requested the Secretary-General to ensure that the post of reviser was provided in the six official languages in accordance with paragraph 19 of section B of its resolution 52/214 of 22 December 1997, and to report thereon to the Assembly at its fifty-fourth session. It will be recalled that under the terms of section B, paragraph 19, of General Assembly resolution 52/214, the Assembly had requested the Secretary-General to reinstate the post of reviser in the six official languages. The present report is submitted pursuant to those two requests.

2. In view of the close relationship between the subject of the present report and the information already provided with regard to the availability of posts at the P-4 and P-5 levels in the report on career development in language services — including translation services — submitted to the General Assembly at its resumed fifty-third session (A/53/919), the document is being issued as an addendum to the aforementioned report.

The availability of reviser posts

3. At the outset, it must be emphasized that, contrary to what appears to be the premise for the request contained in section B, paragraph 19, of General Assembly resolution 52/214, the function of reviser was never abolished. Increased emphasis on self-revision in recent years has been a cause for growing concern on the part of delegations using documentation translated into the six official languages, but revision has remained all along the most effective method of quality control for translation.

4. In accordance with the job classification in effect before 1981, all language staff at the P-4 level in translation services had the functional title of "reviser". All language staff at the P-5 level in those same services had the title of "senior reviser". In 1981, the General Assembly decided that the staffing tables of the translation services at Headquarters and at the United Nations Office at Geneva should be restructured, in order to improve career prospects. This would be done by abolishing a number of P-2/P-3 posts and increasing the number of P-4 and P-5 posts (a "no-cost" measure that resulted in a net reduction of the overall number of posts, based on the assumption that capacity would remain unchanged through greater reliance on self-revision. Following the restructuring, the title of P-4 language staff in translation services was changed to "translator" and the title of P-5 staff became "senior translator". However, those changes did not take into account the fact that straight revision continued to represent a significant share of the duties of P-4 staff, and to constitute the main activity of P-5 staff; in the case of the latter, a review of individual output statistics conducted in 1998 confirmed that 61 per cent of the work produced by P-5 staff at Headquarters was straight revision. In 1998, the title of P-4 staff was changed again to "reviser/self-revising translator", following a review which showed that over 40 per cent of the work produced by staff at that level at Headquarters was revision work. At the same time, the title of P-5 staff was changed back to "senior reviser", to reflect the fact that revision work remained the mainstay of their duties.

Table 1
Share of revision work in total workload
(Percentage)

Duty station	*P-5 staff*	*P-4 staff*
Headquarters	60.2	39.4
United Nations Office at Geneva	42.0[a]	42.0[a]
United Nations Office at Vienna	77.9[b]	24.2
United Nations Office at Nairobi	–	20.4[c]

[a] Average share for staff at the P-4 and P-5 levels considered together.

[b] P-5 staff at the United Nations Office at Vienna have the dual function of Chief of Section and Senior Reviser.

[c] Percentage based on productivity statistics for 1998.

5. A detailed analysis of the availability of P-4 and P-5 posts in language services is contained in paragraphs 5 to 16 of the report of the Secretary-General (A/53/919). Table 2 illustrates the situation with regard to translation services at the four United Nations conference centres (Headquarters, the United Nations Office at Geneva, the United Nations Office at Vienna and the United Nations Office at Nairobi) in particular.

Table 2
Availability of senior reviser (P-5) and reviser/self-revising translator (P-4) posts

Office	*P-5 posts*	*P-4 posts*	*Total language posts (all levels)*	*Ratio of P-5 posts and P-4 posts to all language posts (percentage)*[a]
Headquarters (translation services)	53	133	301	61.8
United Nations Office at Geneva (translation sections)	24	63	156	55.8
United Nations Office at Vienna (translation sections)	6	23	45	64.4
United Nations Office at Nairobi (translation units)	–	13	19	68.4
Total	**83**	**232**	**521**	**60.4**

[a] The percentages show clearly that there is a large capacity for revision available.

Translations subject to revision

6. The criteria upon which decisions are made as to whether or not a given document or part of a document will be revised may vary from service to service, but common general guidelines apply in all cases. They are based on two factors:

(a) The skill level of the staff member who is translating the text. As a rule, all material translated by translators at the P-2 and P-3 levels is subject to revision. The only exceptions to that rule are the following:

(i) Cases where experienced P-3 translators are being trained for self-revision. After an initial period, during which their work is reviewed and evaluated by the training officer, and subject to satisfactory initial results, such translators are expected to perform part-time as self-revising translators. Their work is then spot-checked rather than fully revised;

(ii) Cases where an experienced P-3 translator with a high degree of expertise in a technical field, which is unmatched by any of the available revisers, is given full responsibility for the substantive accuracy of a technical translation falling squarely within his or her field of expertise. Revision, if any, is then limited to the stylistic aspects of the translation;

(b) The nature of the documents translated, regardless of the level of who translates them. The following categories of documents are subject to revision:

(i) All documents of a normative nature, such as draft declarations, plans of action, conventions, which undergo a final revision before their definitive version is adopted;

(ii) All important administrative issuances;

(iii) All draft resolutions. With the exception of those processed in the forward echelon and issued as "provisional", and some General Assembly draft resolutions processed overnight, all draft resolutions are subject to revision at the time of their initial submission. All material processed in the Forward Echelon is revised prior to final issuance. Furthermore, draft resolutions of the General Assembly are in any case revised prior to their inclusion in a Main Committee report. One or two senior revisers are responsible for the revision of all draft resolutions processed by each of the Main Committees of the General Assembly, so as to ensure maximum consistency;

(iv) Politically or otherwise sensitive documents. Subject to time constraints, sensitive documents, such as reports to the Security Council or reports from the Secretary-General containing important proposals, are revised, regardless of the level of the staff who translate them. When deadlines are tight, full revision is limited to those parts of a translated text processed by P-2 or P-3 translators, the balance being checked only for overall consistency. Exceptionally sensitive or otherwise important documents are reviewed by senior advisers, with a final check by the Chief of Service, when time permits.

7. Notwithstanding those guidelines, the general practice is that, whenever deadlines, workload and availability of senior staff allow it, documents should be translated and then revised, rather than self-revised. That policy has made it possible to bring the rate of self-revision in all services closer to the desirable range of 45 per cent.

8. In accordance with requests for the enhancement of the quality of translation made by the General Assembly in its resolutions on the pattern of conferences over the past few years, and in line with the strategy of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, the quality of translation is at the forefront of the concerns of conference services. In that connection, the revision function, which has been maintained as an essential element

of the working methods applied to the translation of documentation, will continue to play a major role. Accordingly, no curtailment of the revision capacity is reflected in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001, nor planned for the foreseeable future.